

READING

Protests in Germany

By 1942, people living in Germany were increasingly aware of the mass murders in places to the east. As early as January, German Jewish professor Victor Klemperer was recording in his diary rumors of “evacuated Jews” being “shot in Riga [Latvia], in groups,”¹ as they left the train. On March 16, he mentioned Auschwitz for the first time and described it as the “most dreadful concentration camp.”² By October he was referring to the camp as “a swift-working slaughterhouse.”³ Klemperer learned of these Nazi abuses despite living in near isolation, thanks to restrictions that had cost him his job, many of his friends, and even his library card.

Some of the first Germans to speak out against Nazi injustices were a group of students at the University of Munich. In winter 1942, Hans Scholl, his sister Sophie, and their friend Christoph Probst formed a small group known as the White Rose. Hans, a former member of the Hitler Youth, had been a soldier on the eastern front, where he witnessed the mistreatment of Jews and learned about deportations. In 1942 and 1943, the White Rose published four leaflets condemning Nazism. The first leaflet stated the group’s purpose: the overthrow of the Nazi government. In the second leaflet, the group confronted the mass murders of Jews:

We do not want to discuss here the question of the Jews, nor do we want in this leaflet to compose a defense or apology. No, only by way of example do we want to cite the fact that since the conquest of Poland three hundred thousand Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way. Here we see the most frightful crime against human dignity, a crime that is unparalleled in the whole of history. For Jews, too, are human beings—no matter what position we take with respect to the Jewish question—and a crime of this dimension has been perpetrated against human beings.⁴

In February 1943, the Nazis arrested the Scholls and Probst and brought them to trial. All three were found guilty and were guillotined that same day. Soon afterward, others in the group were also tried, convicted, and beheaded.

¹ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 5.

² Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), viii.

³ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 155.

⁴ “The Second Leaflet,” *The White Rose Society*, accessed May 24, 2016.

In March 1943, German author Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen wrote in his diary:

The Scholls are the first in Germany to have had the courage to witness for the truth. . . . On their gravestones let these words be carved, and let this entire people, which has lived in deepest degradation these last ten years, blush when it reads them: . . . "He who knows how to die can never be enslaved." We will all of us, someday, have to make a pilgrimage to their graves, and stand before them, ashamed.⁵

Although the Nazis were able to destroy the White Rose by executing its members, they could not keep its message from being heard. Helmuth von Moltke, a German aristocrat, smuggled the group's leaflets to friends in neutral countries. They, in turn, sent them to the Allies, who made thousands of copies and then dropped them over German cities. As a lawyer who worked for the German Intelligence Service, von Moltke had been aware of the murders for some time but had taken no action. By late October, he was asking, "May I know this and yet sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don't I thereby become guilty too?"⁶

In February 1943, the same month that the first members of the White Rose were arrested, Nazi leaders began to round up the last Jews still living in Berlin and elsewhere in the Reich, in mass arrests the Gestapo called the "Dejudaization of the Reich Territory Actions."⁷ Thousands were arrested and most were married to non-Jews; as part of "mixed" families, they had not been targeted earlier. Most of Germany's Jews had already been deported and murdered, but these new arrests and detentions of about 2,000 Jewish men in intermarriages were the only ones to cause a significant protest.

When the arrested Jews did not return home, their "Aryan" relatives began to search for them and quickly discovered that their loved ones were being held at the Jewish administration building at Rosenstrasse 2-4. Within hours, relatives began to gather there. Most were women—the arrested men's wives. As relatives arrived, they began to loudly demand the release of their husbands. They feared that the men would be deported to killing centers; more than 10,000 other Berlin Jews who were not intermarried were deported to the East during the days of the protest at Rosenstrasse. When the guards refused to let the protesters enter the building, the group vowed to return every day in protest. They kept their word. The situation came to a head on March 5. Charlotte Israel, one of the protesters, recalled:

⁵ Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, *Diary of a Man in Despair*, trans. Rubens (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 179-81.

⁶ Helmuuth James von Moltke, *Letters to Freya, 1939-1945*, ed. and trans. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Knopf, 1990), 175.

⁷ Wolf Gruner, *Widerstand in der Rosenstrasse: die Fabrik-Aktion und die Verfolgung der "Mischehen" 1943* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2005), 55

Without warning the guards began setting up machine guns. Then they directed them at the crowd and shouted: "If you don't go now, we'll shoot."

Automatically the movement surged backward. . . . But then for the first time we really hollered. . . .

Then I saw a man in the foreground open his mouth wide—as if to give a command. . . . I couldn't hear it. But then they cleared away. There was silence. Only an occasional swallow could be heard.⁸

Over the course of several days, the Gestapo released all but 25 of the "mixed-marriage" Jews from the Rosenstrasse prison. Those 25 were sent to the labor camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. But they were released within days and then sent to forced labor positions within Germany, where some died, but most survived the war. By releasing the men from detention at Rosenstrasse, the Nazis sought to end the protests and eliminate the appearance of dissent in Germany in order to maintain public support for the regime and its larger plans for the annihilation of European Jews.⁹

By 1944, it was clear to many Germans that their country was losing the war, and opponents of the regime began to take bolder action. Helmuth von Moltke, who had smuggled White Rose leaflets in 1943, gathered a group of prominent Germans for secret meetings at his country estate. There they plotted how to overthrow Hitler. Von Moltke did not support assassination, saying, "Let Hitler live. He and his party must bear responsibility."¹⁰

But by summer 1944, other members of von Moltke's circle were ready to act. On July 20, a member of the group, Claus von Stauffenberg, tried to kill Hitler and his top aides by placing explosives in their conference room. The plot failed.

Hitler and his staff retaliated by arresting and executing suspected conspirators and cracking down on anyone believed to oppose the regime. About 1,000 people either were executed by the Nazis or died by suicide before they could be arrested in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt.

⁸ Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Inter-marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1996), 243.

⁹ Nathan Stoltzfus, *Hitler's Compromises: Coercion and Consensus in Nazi Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 260.

¹⁰ Quoted in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202.



White Rose Resistance Group

Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, and Christoph Probst in June 1942. They were members of the White Rose, a resistance group that condemned Nazism.

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Connection Questions

1. What examples of protest and resistance does this reading describe? Who were the protesters, and what factors motivated them to speak out or take action?
2. What impact, if any, did these examples of protest and resistance have? Does this reading reveal anything about how much the Nazis cared about public opinion?
3. Compare the choices that might have been open in the 1920s and 1930s to individuals like Hans and Sophie Scholl, Helmuth von Moltke, Claus von Stauffenberg, and the “Aryan” wives of Jewish men with the choices available in the 1940s. What options were no longer possible? What choices were now more risky than they might have been in previous years of Nazi rule?
4. Why might the actions of the White Rose have made other Germans feel “ashamed,” as Reck-Malleczewen suggests? Why do you think so few Germans spoke out against the Nazi regime?
5. Helmuth von Moltke asks, “May I know this and yet sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don’t I thereby become guilty too?” Why would von Moltke mention his heated flat and cup of tea? What do his words suggest about the responsibility of bystanders?
6. What is the responsibility of those who learn about atrocities taking place today? Is this question more complicated now than it was in the 1940s?